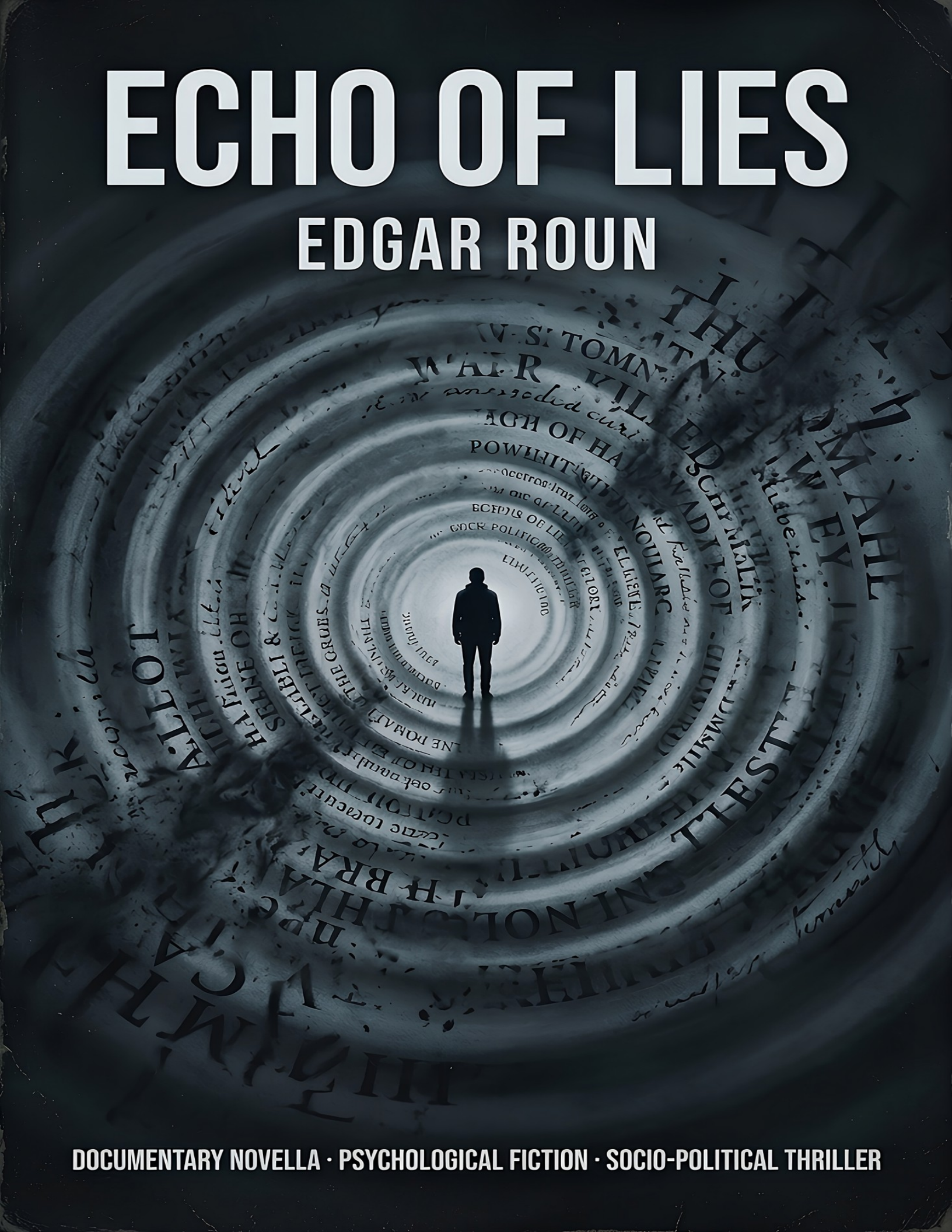
ECHO OF LIES

EDGAR ROUN



DOCUMENTARY NOVELLA · PSYCHOLOGICAL FICTION · SOCIO-POLITICAL THRILLER

Edgar Roun

ECHO OF LIES

A Documentary Novella

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Chapter 1. Silence

The silence in his apartment was not the absence of sound but its dense, almost tangible presence. It lay on the furniture in a thick layer, like dust. It filled the corners like cobwebs. It was as heavy as a tombstone, under which he had buried himself alive. The world had shrunk to these fifty square meters, to the view of a foreign, indifferent city behind the glass. The city lived its own life, flickering with lights, breathing exhaust fumes, wailing with sirens, but all those sounds reached Viktor as if from underwater, muffled and unreal. The only reality was the silence inside.

Sometimes, in rare moments when the gray veil of apathy thinned for an instant, he remembered who he had been. Not just remembered—he saw another person, almost a stranger. A successful, respected investigative journalist whose name was a synonym for integrity. A man who believed that a well-told story could change the world. His weapons were meticulously verified facts and clear, persuasive language. He believed in institutions—in the courts, in editorial independence, in the power of public opinion. He thought any lie would crumble under the weight of facts, never understanding its irrational, viral nature.

He remembered his main principle, almost a creed: *"A person has the right to their own story."* He specialized in reporting on complex, private communities, trying to show them from the inside, without prejudice. Early in his career, his mentor, a journalist of the old dissident school, had taught him the main rule: *"If the system has turned against one person, go and talk to that person. The*

system knows how to lie; individuals tend to lie less often." And he followed that rule—until the system turned against him.

Now life felt like a dream. He moved around the apartment slowly, like an old man. Every gesture was a precise ritual, stripped of meaning. In the morning, he would make coffee, watch the steam rise above the black surface, and feel neither smell nor warmth. During the day, he sat in an armchair, staring out the window where tiny cars crawled along the bridge, mute and distant. In the evening, he turned on his laptop, opened a blank page, and immediately closed it. His fingers, which had once flown across the keyboard, now lay motionless on the table, as if they belonged to someone else. Words had betrayed him. Worse, they had been stolen, twisted, and turned against him.

The smear campaign had not just destroyed his career. It had blown up his inner world, leaving scorched earth behind. His main tool—the written word—had been used against him. He could no longer write, because every word seemed to him either a lie or a potential weapon. He had been *Viktor the journalist*. Now he was no one. This emptiness was not sadness; it was a black hole where his "self" had been.

The phone had been silent for months. At first, he waited. Then, he hoped. Then, he stopped. The friends who had sworn eternal support were the first to vanish. Their faces in old photographs now looked like the faces of strangers from another, impossible world. A world where he had been someone. A prizewinner, his awards now gathering dust in the overhead storage along with his past life. He hadn't thrown them out. Not because he still hoped. It just took effort, and he had no strength left.

The betrayal by colleagues and friends who so easily believed the propaganda created a vacuum around him. He forgot how to trust and, as a result, forgot how to build close relationships. Sometimes, walking past the mirror in the hallway, he would catch a stranger's gaze: a gaunt man with deep shadows under his eyes, in which a mute astonishment had frozen—as if he still hadn't understood how all this had happened.

His world had turned into a paranoid mechanism. His nervous system stayed in a state of constant combat readiness. The sharp sound of a car pulling up, the click of a neighbor's door lock, loud voices behind the wall—all of it was a trigger that brought a rush of adrenaline and cold sweat. He unconsciously tracked people in the street who seemed like "watchers," constantly changed his routes, and avoided open spaces. A casual question from a neighbor about the weather felt like an attempt to gather information; the routine smile of an official looked like a mask for future aggression.

The internet, once his working tool, now seemed like a minefield. He had become a digital agoraphobe. He used a VPN, encrypted messengers, and constantly wiped his cache and browser history. He knew his digital footprint could be used for a new attack. His main fear was not physical retaliation but losing his mind. The fear that he would never again be able to distinguish a real threat from paranoid delirium, because once, the most delusional of his fears had become reality.

This was not life but an imitation of it. The anesthesia of apathy saved him from sharp pain, leaving only a dull, nagging suffering. He was an empty shell, burned out from the inside. And in that emptiness, an echo began to form.

It did not appear at once. At first, there were just sudden attacks of inexplicable anxiety. He would sit in his chair, and suddenly his heart would start pounding, his palms would sweat, and an icy chill would appear at the back of his head. He did not understand why. Outwardly, nothing was happening. The silence remained the same.

And then he heard it. It wasn't a voice. More like a phantom vibration in his skull, a bodiless after-sound of phrases that had branded his memory. He was sitting, mindlessly scrolling through a newsfeed on his tablet. Faces of politicians, footage of disasters, and ads flashed by. He wasn't reading, just letting his eyes slide over them. And then he stumbled on a headline about exposing yet another "destructive organization." In the video, some man in a suit, with a confident and righteous face, was saying all the right, carefully chosen words.

Viktor wasn't listening. He already knew them all by heart. But his body was listening.

"We are protecting families."

The phrase hit not his ears but somewhere in his solar plexus. A short, painful spasm. He put the tablet aside and rubbed his chest. His breathing went ragged.

"This is a threat to society."

Another blow. A flash of light before his eyes, like a camera flash in a dark hallway. He squeezed his eyes shut.

"We are saving children from cults."

Cold. The same familiar cold he had felt in the investigator's office when they told him his work would be classified as extremism.

The echo was rising, filling the inner silence. These were not his thoughts. They were foreign fragments of voices stuck inside him. They sounded within him, but did not belong to him. Like viral code. He stood up and paced the room. He needed to distract himself. Drink some water. Look out the window. But the echo followed him, relentless as a shadow. The phrases repeated, layering over one another, creating a nauseating cacophony. He tried to push them away, to force himself to think about something else. About what? About the faceless cars on the bridge? About the pattern of the wallpaper? But the echo was stronger. It was the only living thing in his dead silence.

He sat back down in the chair, defeated. Closed his eyes. Fine. Let it sound. The anxiety slowly receded, leaving behind the familiar, exhausting fatigue. He sat motionless, perhaps for an hour. The echo faded, turning into background noise—a ringing in his ears.

He heard not the meaning of the words but their *propagandistic structure*. Labels—stamps, stigmas. The rhetoric of dehumanization. The creation of a binary "us–them" opposition, where "they" represented an existential threat. That "intonation of hatred" triggered in him an almost physical response: cold sweat, rapid heartbeat, a sense of constriction in his chest.

And in that moment, when the noise had almost died down, one of the phrases surfaced again. Clear, but now without menace. Just as a fact.

"We are protecting families."

He had heard it thousands of times. From politicians. From activists. From his former friends. It had become part of the

information landscape, as meaningless as advertising. But now, in the deafening silence of his apartment, in his emptied-out mind, something shifted. His analytical mind, which had slept so long under the rubble of trauma, stirred for the first time.

It was not an emotion. Not fear. Not the memory of betrayal. It was a question. Cold, clear, like the prick of a needle.

He opened his eyes. His gaze focused. The silence in the room was no longer oppressive. It was charged, like the moment before something is revealed.

Where had he heard this before?

Chapter 2. The First Thread

The question hung in the suffocating silence like a shard of ice. *Where had he heard this before?*

It was not born of panic or an echo of trauma. On the contrary, it was terrifyingly sober and clear. For the first time in the long months of apathy, Viktor's brain—his main working tool, the thing people had once valued him for—showed signs of life. It did not bring relief. That cold, analytical impulse in the scorched desert of his consciousness felt like a scalpel moving along an old wound.

Viktor sat motionless, afraid to scare off this fragile state. The echo had faded, but the room was filled with its unseen presence, like ozone after a thunderstorm. He rose slowly and walked over to the laptop lying on the table like the headstone of his former life. He opened the lid. The screen came to life, casting a corpse-blue glow over his haggard face. His fingers froze above the keyboard. The simple act of opening a browser demanded titanic effort, as if he were about to clear radioactive rubble with his bare hands. He forced himself to breathe. Inhale. Exhale.

The cursor blinked in the white search bar. What should he look for? The phrase that had hit him? "We are protecting families"? Pointless. Millions of links to public service announcements, family therapists, and political slogans.

He remembered the face of the man from the news segment. Confident, respectable, radiating righteousness. He remembered the caption under his name: "expert on destructive cults." He hadn't

remembered the name, but he had remembered the organization. Slowly, one finger at a time, as if testing the water, he began to type.

The internet opened before him like a reeking maw.

Hours blended into a murky, viscous river of time. Viktor read. He immersed himself in the world he had tried so desperately to escape. Forums for the "victims," news portals, blogs of "cult experts." He read and physically felt how the poison that had ruined his life was seeping back into his blood. Every line was familiar. The same tone of disgust, the same condescending certainty of being right. The same vocabulary.

"Zombified adepts," "brainwashing," "commercial cult," "threat to national security."

These words no longer caused sharp pain. The dull, nagging pain had become his baseline. Now he was looking at them not as a victim. He was looking at them the way a linguist looks at a dead language, trying to decipher its grammar. His journalistic instinct, long buried under the rubble of fear, was waking up. To survive in this stream of hate without drowning in it, he needed a system.

He created a new folder on his desktop. Named it simply: "Research." Inside it—a text file. He began copying phrases into it, classifying them. He acted mechanically, detached, and that methodical approach was the only thing saving him from panic.

Section 1: *Dehumanization*. Here he entered all the epithets that stripped a person of human dignity.

• "A cancerous tumor on the body of society."

• “Spiritual viruses.”
• “Puppets in the hands of puppet masters.”
• Neologisms like “homo jehovisticum.”

Section 2: *Demonization*. Here he collected accusations that pushed the opponent beyond the boundaries of human morality.

• “They are preparing for the genocide of dissenters.”
• “Their rituals are disguised Satanism.”
• “They destroy families and steal children’s souls.”
• Comparisons of rituals with “the desecration of graves by Satanists.”

Section 3: *Discrediting*. Labels that deny any possibility of considering these groups a religion or an ideology.

• “Pseudo-Hindu sect.”
• “Totalitarian financial pyramid.”
• “Commercial cult.”

He worked all night. The coffee had gone cold. Outside, the indifferent city traded its night lights for the gray canvas of dawn. Viktor didn’t notice. He was completely absorbed. This was not work. It was an autopsy of his own tragedy.

He stumbled on a link leading to the main treatise of the movement’s chief ideologue in Russia—a hefty tome with the pretentious title “Sect Studies.” A book his former colleagues cited as a bible, the book the investigator had referred to. He managed to find a scanned copy. Scrolling through the digital pages, he felt a chill. This was the primary source of his nightmare, the textbook on which

the “expert opinions” that had destroyed his life had been based. He could see that his personal tragedy was not an accident but the result of applying specific technologies described here.

It was there, in the chapter devoted to one of the groups, that he found a sentence that made him freeze. He read it over and over, not believing his eyes. The author, in a cold, almost scientific tone, described the group’s eschatological beliefs and drew a conclusion.

While reading an online interview with Dvorkin, he came across a phrase that stopped him cold. He read it over and over, not believing his eyes. Dvorkin, with cold, almost clinical certainty, described the nature of cults and their influence on society:

“Cults do not enrich people; they only drain society of its energy and resources. They recruit members whom they remove completely from public life and siphon finances out of society into their own private and opaque systems. All of this resembles a cancerous tumor that feeds on an organism until it kills it.”

A cancerous tumor.

The word struck him like an electric shock. Not with its cruelty—Viktor was used to cruelty by now. It struck him with its engineered quality. A cold, functional word reducing billions of human beings to the level of household waste that needs to be removed.

He leaned back in his chair. His breath caught. The internal echo exploded into a deafening scream. But now it was no longer just his personal fear. In those words, “cancerous tumor,” there was something more. Something monstrously familiar, but not from his own past. From the deep, dark layers of humanity’s collective memory.

His fingers, trembling, reached for the keyboard again. A new search: “propaganda dehumanization historical examples.”

Link after link. Nazi Germany and the word *Untermensch*. But that wasn’t it. Too general. He was looking for a specific, utilitarian metaphor. And he found it.

An article about the genocide in Rwanda.

He read about the RTLM radio station, “Radio Télévision Libre des Mille Collines,” “Radio of the Thousand Hills,” which had spent months preparing the ground for the slaughter. And he saw *their* word. The word the Hutu propagandists used for the Tutsi people.

Cockroaches. *Inyenzi.*

He stared at the screen, and two words burned in his mind, overlapping each other.

A cancerous tumor. *Cockroaches.*

The principle was the same. Reduce a person to something that can and must be destroyed. Not killed, but exterminated. Liquidated. The territory cleansed. This was not just hatred. It was a technology for justifying mass murder.

Viktor felt an icy chill run down his spine. He opened a new tab and began searching for information on the ideological roots of European anticultism, trying to understand where Russian “sect studies” had found its footing. He came across an article analyzing the works of the Danish theologian Johannes Aagaard, one of the founding fathers of the movement. And there he saw a quote that delivered the final blow, turning his horror into granite certainty.

Aagaard, reflecting on the need to fight “dangerous ideas,” used Hitler’s book as an example:

“The evil deeds of the concentration camps were already in the creed, in *Mein Kampf*, which, consequently, should have been taken seriously. You have to understand that a creed is a deed, so if you want to stop evil deeds, you have to react against evil creeds.”

Viktor closed his eyes. The puzzle had come together. The picture that opened before him was monstrous in its simplicity.

There it was. There was the echo.

Dvorkin’s interview, with its comparison of people to “a cancerous tumor,” was the creed. The harassment, the ruined lives, the prison terms, his own shattered life—that was the deed.

This was not his private paranoia. It was not an accident. It was a pattern. A historical pattern repeating with terrifying precision. An ideology of hatred, once formulated, inevitably gives rise to the practice of destruction. The language changes, the scenery changes, but the intonation remains the same.

He sat in the silence of dawn. For the first time in a long while, he felt neither apathy nor fear. He felt something else. A cold resolve, heavy as lead.

They had put the first thread into his hands. And he knew he would follow it to the very end, whatever it cost him. Even if a void waited at the other end.

Chapter 3. Voices from the Archives

His personal pain was receding, pushed back by the cold excitement of a researcher. Viktor understood that his story was not unique. It was just one of many symptoms of a disease. To grasp its nature, he needed to hear other voices, to find other witnesses, living and dead. He had to step beyond the borders of his own solitude and his own trauma.

Through encrypted chats and old, half-forgotten contacts in human rights circles, he found him. A man who had gone through what Viktor himself had barely managed to avoid—time in a Russian pretrial detention center on charges of “religious extremism.” His name was Dmitry. Their conversation took place late at night in an anonymous messenger. The letters appearing on the screen had no intonation, but behind them stood a living, exhausted human being.

Dmitry told his story dryly, almost like a report, and that detachment was more terrifying than any emotional complaint. Viktor read, and unbearably vivid scenes rose before his eyes.

“The cell was three by six meters,” Dmitry wrote. “On the sunny side. Because of the bars, the plastic window almost never opened. And right across the corridor was the shower room. All the steam from there was sucked into us through the ventilation. When I walked in, the guys were sitting there in their underwear, fanning themselves with pieces of cardboard, sweat pouring off them like in a bathhouse. The walls were wet with steam. There was nothing to

breathe, zero oxygen. And everyone was smoking. I almost suffocated."

Viktor could physically feel that stifling heat, that mixture of sweat, tobacco smoke, and hopelessness.

"I spent several months there," Dmitry went on. "Then house arrest. They put a bracelet on my leg. You know what that is? A device connected to the network. You go three or four meters away from it, the sensor goes off, and the prison service records a violation. Any violation—and they send you back to the detention center. And after what I'd been through, I didn't want to go back there. Three or four meters—that's not even the whole room."

Viktor pictured that invisible chain, that electronic leash that turned your own home into a cell.

"When I got out," Dmitry wrote, and Viktor could feel the text tremble for a second, "I saw how much my wife had aged. I saw what state my child was in. I was in deep shock. We were constantly afraid. Afraid of another search, afraid they'd send me back to the detention center, afraid they'd separate us again."

Viktor knew that fear. He lived with it every day.

And then Dmitry wrote a sentence that took Viktor's breath away.

"You know what I kept thinking about in prison? I read a lot of life stories of Jehovah's Witnesses who were tortured in Nazi Germany. They tormented them with cold and heat in the same way, blasting loud music to break their will. And I thought… it was the same thing."

The same thing. The echo Viktor had heard instinctively was now confirmed by a living witness. History was repeating itself not at the level of metaphor, but at the level of concrete torture practices.

The conversation was drawing to a close. Dmitry said that he and his family had miraculously managed to flee the country when they realized that his wife was about to become a suspect too, and that his daughter at school had begun to have "talks" with a social worker—the first step toward removing a child from an "unsafe" family. They left everything: their house, car, their whole life.

"Not everyone made it out," Dmitry wrote in parting. "One guy, also a Witness, died in prison. From torture and denial of care. But shortly before his death, he managed to get some poems out to the outside. They were preserved. Want me to send them?"

Viktor nodded at the empty screen. A minute later, he was reading lines written in the hell he had just imagined.

So many lies, so much pain
We've tasted through these many years.
Here comes Nazism loose again,
The anticultist plague appears.

They brand me, yet the children ache,
My heart is twisted by their cries.
There's almost no one left who'd take
Them from that net and free their lives.

From anticultist prosecution,
From darkness spawned by fiends and knaves.
When you exist without a right,
Without a voice, a thought that's yours,

You're "worse than rats" and "worse than lice,"

Not counted as a man at all,
A "cancer cell inside the flesh,"
As RACIRS' rabid watchdog howled.

From that mad dog's unending rage
So much suffering I have known.
From RACIRS' media there's no rest,
Their lies crawl everywhere you look.

The truth is this: the brand "sectarian"
Condemns you to an exile's fate.
Refuse the brand? Then be a slave—
A slave of system and of death,

A slave of maniacs, "non-humans,"
A slave of Nazi legacy,
A slave of demons raving wild.
Forget about the truth and freedom,

Forget about your conscience too.
Go brand the others in your nation,
Unleash your terror—that's the core,
The very essence of RACIRS' Nazism.

But know this will not rescue you.
The sword of Damocles is hanging
Above your life, your every breath.
The anticultist darkness gathers.

Disciples of Dvorkin rage
In twisted, ugly grimacing.

They bow down low before their Führer,
To carry out his every order.

Anticult fighters stand prepared,
But evil's not the only force.
There is a chance to shed these chains,
There still is hope and there is good.

The fire of goodness glows in each—
You fan it, make it burn more strong.
Those who today are starved for truth
Will quench that thirst with friends beside.

Friends bear the word to one another,
For great the power of the word.
The moment's come to heed the call,
The call of heart and call of good.

Viktor stared at these lines, and they seemed carved into a cell wall. It was a voice from an archive, but the archive was alive and bleeding.

Night after night Viktor spent in digital catacombs. Silence, which had once been his prison, had become his laboratory. It was filled with the soundless whisper of the dead and of those still living, yet already branded.

He started with the thread that burned his fingers. The words "cancerous tumor." They led him to Rwanda.

On the screen, an article unfolded, dry as bones in a desert. A UN report, testimonies of survivors. He read, and the letters blurred, turning into faces. He forced himself to watch the attached videos.

Footage shot in 1994 shook in the hands of the camera operator. Chaos, screams, and over it all—the cheerful, energetic voice of the announcer from “Radio of the Thousand Hills.” A voice calling people to work. The work was to cut down “the tall trees.”

And then he saw *their* word. That word. The key to the cipher of genocide. Viktor fixed his eyes on the lines of testimony from Jacqueline Murekatete, who at nine years old had lost everything.

“They said the Tutsi were cockroaches. I did not understand how I could turn from a person into a cockroach in just a few days…”

Cockroaches. A cancerous tumor.

Two words spoken on different continents, decades apart, merged in his mind into one chilling chord. The principle was identical. This was not mere name-calling. It was linguistic preparation for killing. A killer may hesitate to stain his hands with a person’s blood, but he will crush an insect without a second thought. Language granted permission. Language lifted the guilt.

He kept digging. The articles led him further into the mechanics of hatred. He learned that long before the first machete blow, the commander of the UN mission, General Roméo Dallaire, had been sending frantic faxes to New York. His informant reported that he had been ordered to compile lists of all residents of Kigali belonging to the Tutsi ethnic group.

Lists.

Viktor recoiled from the screen. Cold sweat broke out on his skin. He remembered. The anticultist websites. Their databases. Lists of “adepts” with names, addresses, photographs. They, too,

were compiling lists. They called it “collecting information to protect society.” Just as in Rwanda it had been called “population registration.” The technology was the same.

He looked at the face of General Dallaire in the photograph—a man who had been shouting while no one listened.

“The international community did everything it could to ignore Rwanda. It was not on their radar, and had no strategic value… A small country in the heart of Africa… essentially did not matter.”

Did not matter. Just as the lives of those now being branded in Russia did not matter. They, too, had been pushed outside the brackets, declared “dangerous elements,” a statistical error in the struggle for “spiritual security.” The echo was becoming deafening.

Dmitry’s revelation about Nazi Germany drove Viktor into that darkness as well. He watched the footage. Propaganda films where people with different faces and a different faith were compared to rats spreading disease. He listened to speeches where lofty words about “defending the nation” and “racial purity” hid the same cold, utilitarian call for *cleansing*. And again—the lists. Again—the branding. Again—the denial of the right to be called human.

Viktor felt like he was suffocating. The air in the room thickened, heavy as soil. He opened the window. The night city breathed with lights and indifference. And he stood on the border of worlds: here, in his quiet Prague apartment, and there—in the barracks of Auschwitz, in the church at Nyamata, in a cell of a Russian detention center. Time no longer existed. There was only one and the same play, repeating itself with different actors.

He needed a key. Not an emotional one, but an intellectual one. What united all of this? What turned words into genocide?

The answer came from an unexpected direction. While digging into the ideological roots of modern anticultism, he stumbled on a critical article about the Danish theologian Johannes Aagaard, one of the movement's "patriarchs." And there, amid the analysis of his controversial ideas, Viktor saw a quote. It was cited as an example of dangerous reasoning, but for him it was a revelation. Reflecting on the fight against ideologies, Aagaard used Hitler as an example:

"The evil deeds of the concentration camps were already in the creed, in *Mein Kampf,* which, therefore, should have been taken seriously. You have to understand that a creed is a deed, so if you want to stop evil deeds, you have to react against evil creeds."

Viktor froze. He read the sentence again. And again.

There it was. The formula. The code he had been looking for.

A creed is a deed.

Dvorkin's words, where people are called a cancerous tumor, were not just words. They were *a creed*. The propaganda of "Radio of the Thousand Hills," where Tutsis were called "cockroaches," was *a creed*. Goebbels' speeches, where Jews were called "parasites," were *a creed*.

And the gas chamber, the machete blow, torture in prison, his own ruined life—those were *the deeds*. The inevitable consequences.

For the first time in all this time, he felt neither fear nor rage. He felt the icy, piercing terror of intellectual insight. He saw not just

coincidences. He saw a technology. As reliable as a guillotine. It worked every time.

He leaned back in his chair and closed his eyes. The voices from the archives fell silent. Now they were inside him. He had become their keeper. And the weight of that knowledge was almost unbearable. This was no longer his private story. It was the case history of humanity's illness, and he was holding its medical record in his hands. And he was the only one who saw the entire picture.

Chapter 4. The Mechanism of Hatred

The shock had passed. It hadn’t evaporated or dissolved into anxiety; it had crystallized inside him, turning into a cold, sharp shard of ice somewhere in his solar plexus. The initial horror that had paralyzed him after those nights in the digital archives had given way to something else. A sober, focused fury. It was the feeling of a surgeon who, overcoming his disgust, bends over a festering wound in order to dissect it and understand the nature of the infection.

Viktor sat at his desk. Dawn was barely pushing through the eternal Prague haze. The room was half-dark, lit only by the monitor's rectangle. Chaos reigned around him: printed pages with underlined lines, napkins covered in notes, empty coffee cups. But in his head, for the first time in a long while, there was order. He opened a new text file. The blinking cursor on the pristine white page looked like a starting gun.

He slowly typed a title: “The Technology of Hatred: A Structural Diagram.”

This was no longer his private tragedy. It was not just a chain of coincidences. He saw a mechanism in front of him. Impersonal, fine-tuned, efficient. And to defeat it, he had to take it apart bolt by bolt, understand how each gear worked. He began to type, and the words fell onto the page dryly, like an autopsy report. His inner monologue became text on the screen.

STAGE 1. DEHUMANIZATION: LINGUISTIC ERASURE

“The first and primary step,” Viktor typed, “is to strip the opponent of human status. You cannot efficiently hate someone who is your equal. Hatred demands hierarchy. The target must be reduced to the level of an object, a parasite, or an inanimate thing. This removes moral constraints from the perpetrator. Killing a human being is a crime. ‘Cleaning the territory’ is work.”

He remembered how, during the smear campaign, one article had called him not a person but a “virus” that had penetrated the healthy body of the journalistic community. At the time, it had seemed just a nasty metaphor. Now he understood: it had been the first stage of the technology, applied to him personally.

He split the screen into three columns. In the first, he opened Dvorkin’s interview. His finger found the necessary line.

“Cults do not enrich people; they only drain society of its energy and resources. They recruit members whom they remove completely from public life and siphon finances out of society into their own private and opaque systems. All of this resembles a cancerous tumor that feeds on an organism until it kills it.”

A cancerous tumor. Words that still carried the chill of a grave. Utilitarian, functional. They turned people into a disease to be eradicated.

In the second column, he opened the report on the genocide in Rwanda. The testimony of survivor Jacqueline Murekatete.

“They said the Tutsi were cockroaches… I did not understand how I could turn from a person into a cockroach in just a few days…”

Cockroaches. Small, repulsive insects that evoke disgust and the urge to crush them.

In the third column, he inserted a quote from a Nazi pamphlet he had found in the archive. He didn't need the original language; the translation hit like a slap.

"The Jew is not a human being. He is a parasite, a bacillus, a disease that infects the healthy body of the nation."

Parasite. Something that lives at another's expense, sucking out vital juices, poisoning the organism.

Viktor leaned back in his chair. A few words on the screen—*cancerous tumor, cockroaches, parasites*—blazed like brands. They came from different eras, from different continents, spoken by different people. But the intonation was the same. It was the intonation of an executioner explaining why his work is necessary.

"Goal achieved," he typed under the table. "The subject has been turned into an object. Now he is no longer 'killed' but 'exterminated,' 'liquidated,' 'cleansed.' Language grants permission for violence in advance by justifying it. This is not hatred as an emotion; it is hatred as a tool."

STAGE 2. CONSTRUCTING AN EXISTENTIAL THREAT

"The dehumanized enemy must pose a mortal danger," he continued his analysis. "Not just be inconvenient. Not just hold different views. He must threaten the very existence of society, its fundamental foundations. The formula is simple: 'They have come to destroy everything we hold dear.'"

He remembered the headlines about himself. “Journalist Viktor Destroys the Foundations of Society.” “His Reporting Is a Threat to Our Children.” A chill ran through him again. The lie had been engineered so that he looked not like a dissident, but like an existential enemy.

He created another table. In the first column, he put the slogans of contemporary “anticult activists,” the very ones that echoed in his head. “We are protecting families!” “We are saving our children!” “This is a threat to national security!”

In the second column, he placed an excerpt from the transcript of “Radio of the Thousand Hills.”

“They, the cockroaches—the Tutsi—will come back to take your land, rape your wives, and kill your children! They will destroy the legacy of the Hutu! Rise up! Defend yourselves!”

In the third—a fragment from a speech by Goebbels.

“The Jewish conspiracy is aimed at undermining German blood, at destroying our families, at corroding our culture. If we do not stop them today, there will be no Germany tomorrow.”

Families. Children. The nation’s future. Culture. Sacred things. The pattern was crystal clear. Propaganda strikes at the deepest, most irrational fears. It does not appeal to reason. It screams directly into the reptilian brain: “You and your offspring face annihilation!”

“Thus,” Viktor concluded, “aggression is presented as an act of self-defense. A society pushed into a state of panic is ready to approve any, even the most brutal, ‘preventive measures.’ It does not feel like an aggressor. It feels like a victim forced to defend

itself. Violence is legitimized through pseudo-protection. We are not attacking. We are saving."

STAGE 3. LEGITIMIZING VIOLENCE: "A CREED IS A DEED"

Viktor felt himself drawing toward the very heart of the mechanism, its philosophical core, the final link that turns words into sentences. He pulled up that same article about the Danish theologian Johannes Aagaard, the founding father of European anticultism, and put on the screen the quote that had become his master key.

"The evil deeds of the concentration camps were already in the creed, in *Mein Kampf*, which, therefore, should have been taken seriously. You have to understand that a creed is a deed, so if you want to stop evil deeds, you have to react against evil creeds."

He stared at the sentence, and the icy shard inside him seemed to expand, filling his chest. There it was. The intellectual and legal justification for a witch hunt.

"This is the final, most sophisticated stage," he typed, his fingers barely obeying him. "It turns the entire legal system upside down. The crime is no longer the action but the thought. Not the deed, but the doctrine. The creed.

If 'a creed is a deed,' then a person can and must be judged not for what he has done, but for what he believes. Mere belonging to a group with a 'wrong' creed already becomes a crime. And then persecution is not repression for faith. It is the 'prevention of crimes.' Law enforcement officers who put people in prison for their convictions are not executioners. They are noble guardians who prevent future 'evil deeds' that supposedly are 'already contained' in

that creed. Dvorkin's words about a 'cancerous tumor'—that is the creed. And my destroyed world, shattered lives, prison terms—that is the reaction to it. The deed."

He remembered the investigator's office. The tired man in uniform who had never read his articles but confidently said, "Your beliefs are dangerous for the state." The investigator was no monster. He was a cog in the mechanism, acting exactly according to this logic. He was preventing "evil deeds" by reacting to a "wicked creed." And he was absolutely sure he was right.

Viktor finished typing. On the screen in front of him was a coherent scheme, terrifying in its logic. A three-stage conveyor belt for manufacturing hatred and justifying violence.

1. Call a person an insect.
2. Declare that this insect carries the plague and will kill your children.
3. Assert that the very nature of this insect is already a crime, and its destruction is not murder but sanitation.

Viktor pushed back from the desk. The silence in the room was no longer empty. It was filled with cold, ringing knowledge. He felt neither triumph nor relief. Only weight. He had dissected the monster and seen that it was made not of mystical evil but of simple, reproducible components. And the most frightening thing was that once assembled, this mechanism could run forever, changing only its fuel and the names of its victims.

The echo of lies had acquired a structure. Now he knew his enemy's face. And that face was a faceless technology.

Chapter 5. The Unchanging Intonation

The room ceased to exist. The walls, the desk, the shimmering laptop screen—all dissolved into thick, vibrating air that felt as if it could be sliced with a knife. Time collapsed. Past, present, and a terrifyingly possible future fused into a single point, and that point was Viktor. He sat in his chair not as a person, but as a membrane catching a single endless vibration running through history.

He was no longer reading. He was listening.

He was not listening to words. Words were just clothing, camouflage, a temporary shell. He was listening to what lay beneath them. The music. The melody. The intonation.

It was an illumination like a lightning strike that does not light things up but burns the eyes, leaving only the knowledge of a blinding darkness behind. All these weeks, buried under an avalanche of documents, testimony, and his own pain, he had been looking for a connection, a logical bridge between eras. He had been searching for a formula, an algorithm, a mechanism. And he had found one. But the truth turned out not to be a mechanism. It turned out to be a song. A terrible, eternal lullaby of hatred that humanity sang to itself, changing only the names in the verses.

In his mind, like images appearing on overheated photographic paper, forms began to emerge, woven out of sound.

He heard the cheerful, almost upbeat voice of the announcer from “Radio of the Thousand Hills.” A voice calling for “work,” for “cleansing,” for getting rid of “cockroaches.” And in that merry, jaunty tone, there was no rage. Only utilitarian necessity, like a pest control worker explaining why the insects have to be exterminated.

And then, without a pause, he heard another voice—cold, confident, academic. The voice of a contemporary Russian “sect expert.” With the same businesslike intonation, the voice explained how sects are like “a cancerous tumor that feeds on an organism until it kills it.”

Cockroaches. A cancerous tumor.

The words were different. The continents were different. The victims were different. But the intonation was the same. The intonation of a sanitation worker taking out the trash. No anger, no passion, only the sense of a job well done.

Then another instrument joined in—harsh, barking, cutting under the skin. The voice of a Nazi propagandist blaring from a loudspeaker in a town square. A voice shouting about “parasites,” about “infection,” about “rats” that threaten the purity of the nation. The intonation of panic mixed with disgust. The intonation of a doctor demanding that the source of an epidemic be isolated and destroyed at once.

And the echo answered it. The voice of a modern blogger having an on-camera meltdown on YouTube. “Spiritual viruses!” “A cancerous tumor on the body of society!” he shrieked, and in his voice Viktor heard the same intonation of panicked disgust. They

were not people, they were a disease. And you don't negotiate with a disease. You cut it out.

At that moment, his investigation stepped beyond history. It intruded into his Prague present. One evening, absentmindedly scrolling through the news, he stumbled upon an article about a recent tragedy—the shooting at Charles University. The city was still buzzing with horror and rumors. Viktor began reading the coverage, and his professional eye snagged on one name that appeared far too often: Kristýna Ciroková. A journalist who was covering the tragedy with unnerving zeal, publishing dozens of pieces.

He dug deeper. A chill ran down his spine. Ciroková was known for her close ties to the Czech anticult movement. He found articles describing her rhetoric as "discrediting, undermining the authority of the government, and using tactics of accusation and mockery." He saw how the tragedy was being used to stoke fear, to push the same old agenda. The echo was coming not from the past now, but from the next street over.

The puzzle was resolving into a global, hideous picture. This was not just a series of coincidences. It was a network—an international, well-organized relay of hatred.

And then he found the last, oldest thread—an article comparing the Czech movement to its historical prototype—the Lutheran Apologetics Center led by Walter Künneth, which, before the Nazis came to power, had done the same thing—drawing up lists of "sects," and whose rhetoric and activity later helped radicalize the NSDAP.

Künneth in Germany. Aagaard in Denmark. Dvorkin in Russia. It was the same ideological virus, passed down from generation to

generation, from teacher to student. It had the ability to reproduce itself and to adapt, but its genetic code—its intonation—remained unchanged.

Now the choir of righteous voices in his head was at full volume.

"We are protecting families," chanted marching toughs in brown shirts as they burned the books that "corrupted" their children. "We are protecting families," said, from a television screen, the respectable "expert on destructive cults," the very same type who had set off the echo in Viktor's own life.

"They are not like us!" the village chief in Rwanda assured his peasants, pointing at yesterday's neighbors. "Their hearts are black!" "They are not like us!" his former colleagues wrote in their newspapers, explaining why he, Viktor, had to be isolated from society. "He's brainwashed, he has lost his human face."

"We are saving children!" That phrase rang louder than all the rest. It was the refrain that justified everything. With it, they took children from "unreliable" parents in the Third Reich. With it, they handed machetes to teenagers in Rwanda. With it, they showed up with search warrants at Russian homes, scaring his daughter half to death.

It was the same music. It played on the simplest, oldest strings of the human soul: fear for one's offspring, disgust toward the Other, the hunger for simple answers. Viktor's personal trauma stopped being personal. It became a tuning fork that allowed him to hear the entire score. The pain he had gone through, the humiliation, the betrayal—all of it was not a random glitch in the system. It was the precise, well-rehearsed performance of an eternal melody. He had

not been the victim of particular individuals. He was the person this music had been played upon.

The truth he had found was simple and monstrous.

A creed is a deed.

That phrase from the archives was not a key to a cipher but to the score. It explained how the notes on paper—words of hatred written in Mein Kampf, in the book Sect Studies, spoken on the radio—inevitably turned into sound: into the clack of a bolt being drawn, the whistle of a machete, the click of a cell door lock.

He understood. Lies do not just repeat themselves. That would be too easy. Words repeat, facts repeat. An echo is something else. An echo is when a sound, bouncing off new walls in a new time, returns with its original, untouched tonality, its unchanging intonation. The volume may be higher or lower, but its frequency, its emotional essence, is the same.

Jew. Cockroach. Sectarian. The words change like stage sets in a theater. But the play remains the same. And the intonation with which the actor says, “He is the enemy,” never changes.

Viktor stood up and walked to the window. Prague slept under a gray blanket. But for him, the world outside no longer existed. He saw an endless theater where the masks change, but the grimace of hatred beneath them remains the same. He felt an icy horror not from the fact that evil exists, but from the fact that it is so talentless, so lazy, so monotonous. It does not even bother to compose a new tune. It just drops the needle on the same old record again and again. And again and again, millions are ready to march to it.

The echo of lies is not a faint sound from the past. It is an eternal present. A vibration built into the very structure of human fear. And as long as people are afraid, this music will never fall silent. It will lie in wait for its conductor. And he will always appear.

Chapter 6. The Answer

The revelation did not bring light. It left behind a scorched, ringing emptiness, like the epicenter of a powerful explosion, when the sound has already passed but the shockwave has not yet dispersed. The horror that only yesterday had seemed bottomless ebbed away, leaving on the floor of his soul a cold, heavy, perfectly clear crystal of knowledge. Viktor sat in his chair, and the world that had shrunk to a single point began slowly to unfold again. But it was a different world now, and he was different in it.

He was no longer a victim, paralyzed by phantom pain. Horror, once recognized and dissected, had stopped being a weapon against him. It had become an exhibit in his personal museum, a piece of evidence. And he himself—no longer the object of a smear campaign—had become a witness. Not a judge, not an avenger. A witness. Someone who had seen the mechanism from the inside, who had heard its eternal, unchanging intonation, and whose only duty now was to testify.

It was not a relief. A weight settled on his shoulders. Not the sticky, viscous weight of depression that had dragged him to the bottom for months. This was a cold, granite weight of responsibility. He was the only one who had walked the entire path—from his personal tragedy to its historical roots, from a disjointed scream of pain to a clear, terrifying formula: *“A creed is a deed.”*

He held all the threads in his hands: Aagaard’s icy quote, interrogation records from Russian pretrial detention centers, the screams from “Radio of the Thousand Hills,” and the utilitarian

comparison to “a cancerous tumor” in the interview that had become a manifesto for his persecutors.

He had seen how this technology was passed along like a relay across countries and decades, from Künneth to Alexander Dvorkin. And now these threads converged at a single point—him. To remain silent would mean becoming an accomplice.

He got up and went to the desk. The laptop that for many months had been a portal to hell now lay there simply as a tool. A weapon? No. A tool. He opened the lid. The blank page that had once triggered panic attacks now looked back at him calmly and insistently. His fingers, which had forgotten how to write, hovered over the keyboard. He remembered who he had been before: a journalist who believed that a well-told story could change the world. How naïve. Now he knew that stories do not change the world. Intonation changes the world. And it was precisely the intonation of hatred that he had to dissect and present to everyone.

His own voice had to become the answer.

Not a scream of rage. Not a plea for justice. A calm, methodical, ruthless analysis. He would write a book. He would call it *Echo of Lies*. In it he would take the mechanism of hatred apart, piece by piece, the way a watchmaker dismantles a broken chronometer. He would show every gear, every screw: here is the dehumanizing metaphor, here the construction of an existential threat, here the legitimization of violence through twisted concepts. He would lay Dvorkin’s “cancerous tumor” side by side with Rwanda’s “cockroaches” and Goebbels’ “parasites” and force the world to see

their kinship. He would not accuse. He would prove. As in his former, impossible life, his only weapon would once again be facts.

Evil does not need to be defeated. It needs to be answered.

Day after day, night after night, he sat at his desk. His apartment once more became his world, but now it was not a prison; it was a workshop. He built the chapters the way he had once constructed the scheme in the fourth chapter of his investigation. He returned to the voices from the archives, but they no longer tormented him. He gave them the floor. He wove into the narrative his own pain, flashbacks of interrogations, humiliation, fear for his daughter—not to evoke pity, but as irrefutable evidence. His life had become Exhibit A.

He found in his files that poem written in a cell by a man who had not lived to give his own answer:

"...Nazism came, set loose again,
here anticultist plague appears."

He made those lines the epigraph to the final part of his book. A voice that others had tried to silence would sound again.

When he finished the last page, Viktor felt neither joy nor triumph. Only deep, all-consuming fatigue and a strange, quiet calm. He had done what he had to do. He had turned his painful, haunting echo into an answer. Would he send the manuscript to publishers? Yes. He would send it to several independent European publishers and human rights organizations, fully aware of all the risks. He knew that the machine he had described does not forgive witnesses. But the fear was gone. In its place, there was meaning.

Would anyone read his book? Would it change anything? He did not know. The mechanism of hatred was too ancient; it was built into the darkest corners of human nature, into the fear of the Other, into the craving for simple solutions. He remembered General Dallaire's words about how no one cared about Rwanda. Perhaps his warning, too, would drown in the noise of information.

But the point was not victory. The point was the act of bearing witness.

Viktor stood up and walked to the window. Below him, the indifferent, beautiful city was living its life. It was no longer his prison. It was just a city. Viktor was no longer its prisoner. He was a man who had found meaning not in defeating the darkness, but in lighting a candle.

The echo of lies would always be there. That he understood clearly. It would return in new guises, with new words on its lips, finding ever new conductors for its eternal, monotonous melody. But as long as there was at least one voice ready to answer it, as long as there was at least one person turning their fear into testimony, lies would never have absolute power.

Its echo would never become all-consuming silence.